

BORN OF FRUSTRATION:

The History of MEN SHOULD WEEP

By Lesley McDowell

“One evening in the winter of 1942 I went to the theatre. I came home in a mood of red-hot revolt against cocktail time, glamorous gowns and underworked, about-to-be-deceived husbands. I asked myself what I wanted to see on stage and the answer was life. Real life. Real people.”

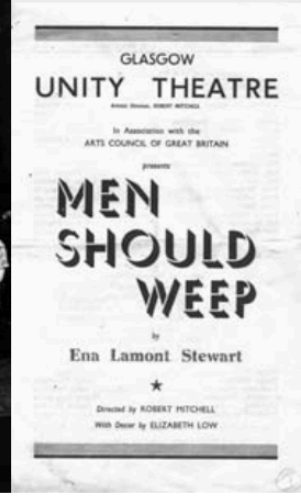
And so *Men Should Weep* was born. Born of frustration and anger, Ena Lamont Stewart's extraordinary play about life in a Glasgow tenement during the depression was popular with audiences when it first appeared in 1947, though it may have been misunderstood by the critics. In some reviews it was dismissed as a 'sociological document', or even worse, a mere 'woman's play'. Even a friendlier run in London failed to save it. But then, thirty years later, a miracle occurred. Stewart revised it in the 1970s and in 1982, the 7:84 Scotland Theatre Company, led by John McGrath, revived it as part of their *Clydebuilt* season of Scottish plays.

This time, a gentler, happier ending earned Stewart plaudits from the press and comparisons with Sean O'Casey. The Daily Mail's reviewer, Jack Tinkler, seemed to cement Stewart's place in the pantheon of great post-war British playwrights when he said: "Less kindly mortals would have every right to feel bitter that the acclaim given to the *Angry Young Men* in the Fifties had actually been pre-empted by the writings of this *Gentle Middle-Aged Woman* ten years previously."

Setting aside the fact that Stewart was only thirty-five when she wrote *Men Should Weep*, this was the kind of accolade that should have seen her play performed year in, year out.

And yet, once again, it disappeared from view. It wasn't until over a decade later that a major production of the play was staged again when TAG toured Scotland with it in 1996; then in 2005, Dominic Dromgoole's Oxford Stage Company took it to a 21st century audience.

It would seem, though, that we still haven't learned how to appreciate, or how to respond to this play. Last year, London's National Theatre was praised for producing a version that critics found "uplifting" and "brilliantly comic . . . stock full of pleasures." Are we so far away from home-grown poverty today that we can find unemployment, alcoholism, domestic violence and TB-infected children "uplifting", and concentrate instead on the laughs? Is that what we think Ena Lamont Stewart was trying to do for us, when she came back from her night at the theatre in such a rage? The many different productions, and our responses to them, show how confused we still are about this play. In 2005, *Men Should Weep* was voted one of the top plays of the 20th century by the National Theatre. And yet, something caused it to be consistently misunderstood over a half century and more; something caused it to be picked up and dropped, picked up and dropped, time after time. Why is this play such an enigma?



Photography from Glasgow Unity Theatre's production of *Men Should Weep* at the Embassy Theatre, London. 14th June, 1948. Handbill from the original production at the Athenaeum Theatre, Glasgow, 30th January, 1947. (Photos by John Vickers, all images courtesy of the University of Glasgow, Scottish Theatre Archive.)

Ena Lamont Stewart was born to a minister in Glasgow in 1912, the youngest of ten children. A bright child, she was nevertheless forced to leave school when she was only sixteen, after the sudden death of her father. She worked first as a librarian in Aberdeen, and then as a receptionist at the Sick Children's Hospital in Glasgow. It was this experience that informed her first play, **Starched Aprons**. By this time, she was married to an actor, Jack Stewart, and both became involved with the Glasgow Unity Theatre group. It encouraged plays with contemporary urban settings about the Scottish working class, in accordance with its manifesto: "Theatre is the school of the people – it makes them think and it makes them feel."

It was an attempt to get away from the drawing-room manners of the middle and upper class that so dominated theatre at the time, and was responsible for works like Robert McLeish's **The Gorbals Story** and Benedick Scott's **The Lambs of God**. It set out to portray working class people as human beings going about their everyday business at home or at work, to celebrate their courage as much as expose their prejudices.

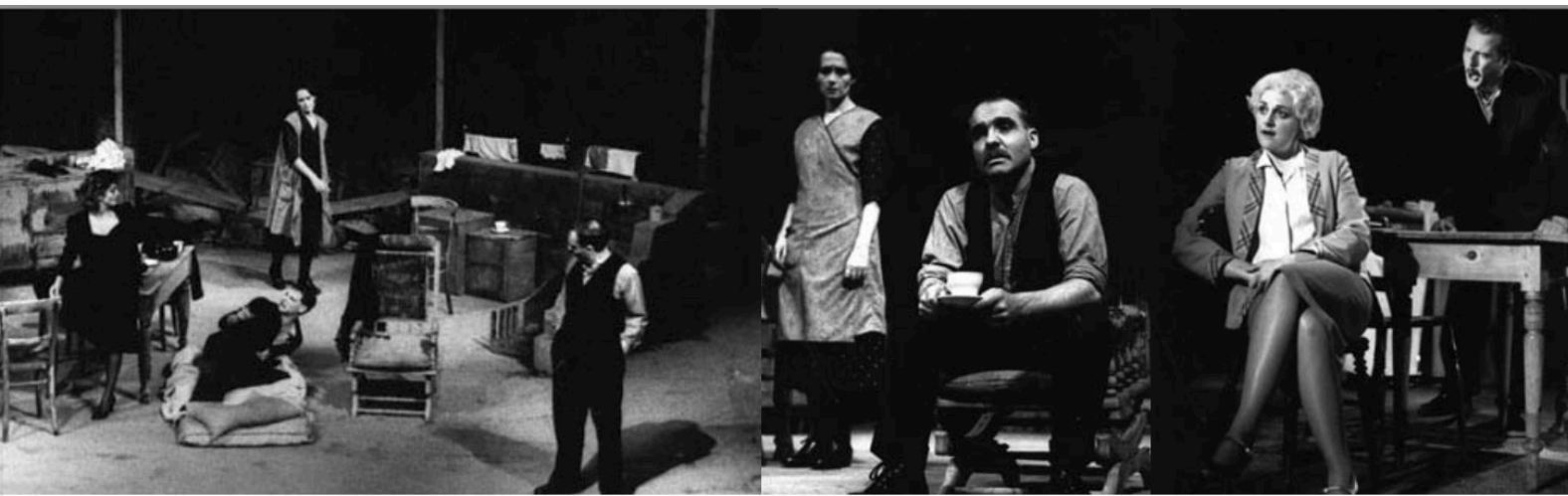
What Stewart saw at the hospital where she worked mirrored the Unity Theatre's concerns perfectly. For what she saw was a succession of children made sick by poverty and malnutrition. One mother, holding a few bare things belonging to her tubercular child, lamented, 'they've kep him in.' Stewart would use that devastating line in her second play, **Men Should Weep**.

Starched Aprons was a great popular success, and the theatre company naturally expected a second hit with **Men Should Weep**.

This play revolves around matriarch Maggie Morrison as she struggles to hold her family together. Her husband John is out of work; her son, Bertie has TB. There is barely enough food to feed them as well as her daughters Jenny and Edie, sons Ernie and Alec, and his wife Isa, or the youngsters Marina and Christopher. Granny has to be packed off to another relative, and Maggie's sister Lily, single and working full-time in a pub in Cowcaddens, baits Maggie about her choices in life as much as she tries to help out the family's poverty with tins of beans and cough mixture.

There is a political element to the play that resonates today – when Maggie complains, "I dinnae ken whit they dirty rotten buggers in Parliament are daein wi ma money, but they're daein something", she's voicing feelings many of us have about our politicians now. But there's also a personal element – a battle of the sexes that is never clear-cut. Maggie may rage at her husband and wail at him, too, but she also loves him with real tenderness: "It's because things have aye been right atween you an me that I can struggle on." As the man upstairs gives his wife a good beating, Maggie can say to her single sister, "I'm paid wi love . . . You canna see a man as a man. Ye've got them a lumped together."

Stewart said once that she wrote **Men Should Weep** at a "pitch of intensity." "I couldn't possibly tell you what I was thinking about when I sat down to write it . . . I had no idea what the characters were going to do next . . . I think it was a kind of emotional release I needed at the time."



Left and middle: from 7:84's 1982 production, directed by Giles Havergal and performed at the Mitchell Theatre, Glasgow. (Photos by Andrew Brannan.) Right: a scene from TAG's 1996 production. (Photos courtesy of the University of Glasgow, Scottish Theatre Archive.)

Her own marriage was breaking down at this point and she would soon become the single mother of a young son.

The first version of the play ended with Maggie dying in childbirth, John descending into alcoholism, Alec in jail for murdering Isa, Jenny a prostitute, Granny in the poorhouse and little Bertie succumbing to TB. It terrified some, and failed to be the box office success the theatre company had hoped for. The fights between Maggie and John were singled out for particular criticism, with one reviewer calling the play "the bitter, vitriolic tirade against the male of the species . . . the play's greatest weakness." But, argued Kenneth Roy in a re-appraisal of Stewart's work many years later, "a propagandist she was not."

In the 1970s revised text then, survival and strength became more central to the play's message. As Graham McLaren, director the National Theatre of Scotland's new production of the play, says, "Without hope and love there is no tragedy. You have to hope that you'll escape your fate. And in the original version there was no hope. It may have been more accurate in its depiction of the lives of people in the slums at that time but dramatically it was less satisfactory because she didn't give them a fighting chance."

This time, Stewart made Maggie gentler but stronger: "I can manage him. I can aye manage him," she says of John, while Jenny holds his hand. "If onythin wis tae happen tae ony o the weans, John would tak it bad. They canna staun up tae things like a wumman. They loss the heid and shout." If this sounds like it's the women who keep things together, McLaren sounds a note of

caution about the gender balance of the play: "The title means Mankind Should Weep, that we tolerate this kind of poverty. I also think mankind should weep that we didn't encourage her to write more plays. Why isn't there a canon of Ena Lamont Stewart plays? This play was radical – it came only sixty years after Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, where Nora abandons her children. Here we have prostitution and poverty, it's more like Gorky. Yet it wasn't really appreciated."

After *Men Should Weep's* initial appearance, Stewart submitted many plays to Scottish theatre companies but was repeatedly turned down. Perhaps, as McLaren says, she was just "forty years ahead of her time", and perhaps too, as Dromgoole has argued, the "men's club of theatre" simply excluded her. "I think she fell out of favour because people are always looking for the new," says McLaren. "They see the accent on the page and think it's Oor Wullie. But it's an extraordinary piece of drama that predates the likes of Ken Loach."

It seems strange that the success of the revised play in the 1980s didn't result in a call for some of those unproduced Stewart plays to be performed at last. It has taken a new century to see diverse productions of her play make it to the stage once again, and to encourage responses as varied as ever. Stewart's play is the ultimate shape-shifter, changing with each age as new resonances are found and explored. It may be flung into obscurity all too often, but it keeps coming back. It will not lie. It will not rest.

Lesley McDowell is a literary critic and novelist.